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A Sense of Place and Identity in Aotearoa New Zealand
By Kelly Thompson - Artist, Lecturer, and Head of Textiles at the
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*"The intersections of nature, culture, history and ideology form the ground on which we stand- our land, our place, the local. The lure of the local is the pull of place that operates on each of us, exposing our politics and our spiritual legacies."*¹

This presentation focuses on a few contemporary artists who use textiles to express connections with place and sense of self, in the "Land of the Long White Cloud", Aotearoa New Zealand. It is a subjective selection, representing both established practitioners and emergent voices, people who are approaching concepts in textile media from varying viewpoints and sources, including cultural, geographical and material relationships.

Being an island nation, in the southern part of the South Pacific, this is a land in which various waves of migration have occurred, beginning with the original settlers, the Maori. According to current archaeological evidence the first wave of planned colonisation occurred by Polynesian people approximately 1000 years ago.² These ancestors of the present day Maori, made long voyages in large canoes, bringing with them animals and plants for domestic needs and progressively discovering, utilising and adapting the rich natural resources of birds, sea life, and plants which enabled continued survival in the cooler climate.

Subsequent migrations occurred from the 1840's onward, predominantly from the British Isles; people collectively referred to by the Maori the term, Pakeha. Gold discoveries in the 1860's brought many Chinese immigrants who established themselves as traders and market gardeners, with migration from people of the Pacific Islands from the 1950's onward. My own family benefited from the 'open door policy' of the 1970's, which saw many Europeans and Americans escaping the pressures of industrialised, crowded states for what was perceived as a 'rural paradise' in the South Pacific. Further immigration from Asian countries from the mid-1980's onward has again changed the cultural profile of the country.

Ann Salmond has extensively researched the narratives of the first cross-cultural contacts, both oral and written between Europeans and Maori. 'Zeelandia Nova' first appears in European accounts by the Dutch voyager Abel Tasman in 1642 and more extensively in the accounts and items collected by Captain James Cook and crew of the Endeavour from

¹ Lippard, Lucy R. *The Lure of the Local – senses of place in a multicentered society*. p.7 The New Press, New York 1997

² Davidson, Janet "Maori Prehistory" in *Maori Art and Culture*, p.8-10 edited by DC Starzecka. Published by David Bateman Ltd, in association with the British Museum Press, 1996

1769 onwards.³ The articles collected from this time, including textiles, continue to provide a rich point of reference for contemporary Maori artists. Drawings, maps, and descriptions from the European perspective are also being critiqued and referred to by artists in explorations of national identity, in our so-called post-colonial era.

It is 160 years since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi - an agreement between nearly 500 Maori chiefs and representatives of the British Crown. Through this treaty the British gained in effect, sovereignty, while to the Maori people, it was understood as a guarantee of their rights to the land, sea and other resources. Subtle differences between the Maori and English texts of the Treaty, and subsequent settler and government actions, resulted in disputes over land, with both physical and legal wars being fought in the decades following the signing.

The colonisers assumption of forging 'one people', building a special relationship between European and indigenous people has not resulted. Although the treaty over the years has had a modifying influence on official dealings with Maori people, public policy and some attitudes, the historical record shows the European determination to dominate. Since the 1980's, however, New Zealand society has increasingly evolved toward a policy that "acknowledged indigenous precedence...based on reciprocity, ritual and protocol that was constitutive of Maori sociality".⁵ The concept of Partnership is legislated, but is only slowly making inroads into organisational thinking.

The Waitangi Tribunal (a government judicial body) is slowly addressing Maori land and resource grievances, while language initiatives have seen a revival in the cultural, visual and performing arts. As Nicholas Thomas comments:

*"Colonial relationships certainly endure, but they are in the process of being criticised, reflected upon and undone; and if this continues to be an incomplete process, it nevertheless entails deliberate efforts of decolonisation and redefinition, which are particularly conspicuous in the domain of art"*⁶

A new commentary, of hybridised and entangled histories is emerging in the textile arts. Fresh threads evoking the people, land, rivers and oceans of this bi-cultural land. Although people have migrated here from all points of the compass, the bi-cultural relationship of Maori to all subsequent settlers is paramount. The current generation of artists make positive use of diverse cultural influences; acknowledging mixed ancestry and experiences of place, as they begin to define Aotearoa in the 21st Century.

The prestigious feather and fiber cloaks of the Maori may be well recognised internationally, but another form of fiber art which has become very emblematic as a

³ Salmond, Anne *Two Worlds – first meetings between Maori and Europeans 1642-1772*. Viking Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd 1991

⁴ Orange, Claudia *The Treaty of Waitangi* p.4 Allen and Unwin, New Zealand Ltd 1987

⁵ Thomas, Nicolas 'New New Zealand Art: an introduction' in *Pasifika*, Exhibition Catalogue. Canberra Contemporary Art Space 1998

⁶ Thomas, Nicholas *Oceanic Art* p.198. Thames and Hudson Ltd, London 1995

mark of pride in cultural identity is the plaited basket, or *kete*, made of New Zealand flax, *kiekie*, *pingao* or other leaf fibres.

Christina Hurihia Wirihana is an eminent contemporary Maori weaver, artist and teacher from Rotourua. She is known as a superb mat and *kete* weaver, but she also works experimentally from this base to make sculptural objects and installations. She acknowledges her mother as her most significant weaving teacher, along with the importance of her *whakapapa*, (ancestors or lineage). Her work involves an exploration of native plant materials found in the bush, gathered and handled with the respect of a conservationist. At times the personality of leaf ends are allowed to emerge from the tight woven structure. In *Kete* and other works, dyed fiber is worked in complex plaited patterns to form rich surfaces.

Non-Maori weavers have also picked up the *kete* form, using industrial materials to make cultural references to different experiences. Emily Siddell draws on the internationalism of handbags, Victorian beaded evening bags, Maori feather ketes; crossing Pacific forms with the urban materials of electrical and industrial wire, plastic, and fused glass. Her European ancestry informs her vocabulary of skills – crochet, weaving, twining – while her locality, the multicultural Auckland (known as the largest Polynesian city in the world) provides a broader visual reference. This is work which pays homage to these diverse cultures, appropriating and quietly transforming them, through her fresh aesthetic and empathy with found and recycled materials.

David Edwin Thomas has selected celluloid movie strips, a ready-made element, to weave into mats and *ketes*, presenting them on light boxes in order to catch glimpses of intersecting events. Rich colour and pattern are the first impressions one sees and then the overlapping history or social comments become evident. Iconic New Zealand films such as “Once were Warriors”, “War Stories” and *Topless Women Talk about their Lives* have been incorporated. These films portray slices of social experiences, a layering of identity beyond a “clean-green Pacific paradise”. Old and new technologies merge; eurocentric modernist ideals and indigenous practices are intentionally hybridised with urban materials.

Being of Maori, Irish, Scottish and Yorkshire descent, are factors Maureen Lander cites as influencing the approach taken in her work, which involves ephemeral installations utilising fiber, space, stories and light and interaction. Recent multi-media works may incorporate sound, plastic, nylon monofilament, light sensitive string games, all making patterns in space, along with more traditional materials like *muka*, and *harekeke*. The particular locations where work is to be installed shapes the conceptual decisions, whether it be “art belonging to or inspired by the tradition of Maori weaving”⁷, or Western art practices and museum contexts. A work from last year combines the weavers’ symbolism of the spider web, with the World Wide Web. It incorporated flax components like *piupiu* (Maori ceremonial shirts worn during performances) and small speakers with recordings of her daughter working a keyboard, the clacking sound which

⁷ Tamiti-Quennell, Megan. *Pu Manawa – A Celebration of Whatu, Rananga and Taniko*. p 32 Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 1993

emanates connecting two similar sounds and two realities. Titled www.chat/ipu/korero which translates as “a container for talk”, it reflects her interests in language. A recent collaborative installation “Hyperthreads” continues this examination of new and old media, and digital language from several perspectives.

Emergent textile practitioners selected from the Otago Polytechnic School of Art express their bi-cultural reality through a variety of cross-disciplinary workings. Many Maori tertiary students do not know the language. Their parent’s and grandparent’s generation were actively discouraged or banned from using Maori in school and in social contexts and this has impacted on the recent tertiary generation. Now many students learn the language through University study, although pre-school and primary school immersion programmes established in the last decade will have interesting flow on effects. Maori is a legal language, in theory able to be used in any transaction with the Crown and indeed Parliament itself. An increasing number of Maori words are in common usage by the media and society generally.

Janina Dell is a young graduate, of Maori and Pakeha parentage, who uses textile materials and structures to express abstractly the impact the degradation of language has had over the generations. This work consists of an installation of 7 nets, made from dyed flax leaf and fiber, mono-filament, and plastic bags, worked in knotted netting and knitting, with printed texts woven into mats on the floor. Each net symbolises a period of history, a marker in the shaping of Aotearoa, reflecting also Dell’s awareness of her own identity and language issues.

Kerry Arlidge grew up as the daughter of an artist. Her father was actively involved in an influential movement of Maori artists and teachers in the 50’s and 60’s. Under the Education Department, the Tovey group looked to Maori art traditions but worked to find new ways to express ideas of cultural identity and increase pride in things Maori. Kerry has also looked to traditional concepts and forms, but works with silk organza, canvas, dyeing and sewing, printing and painting. The content makes reference to cloaks, *wakas* (canoes) and intermingling the patterns and symbols of ancestors, with the symbols of the Christian colonisers, including her Pakeha ancestry. She builds up images, layer upon layer, colour upon colour, responding to and affected by what has come before, much like the layers of history imprinted on the land.

The length of this paper has unfortunately precluded an investigation into the contemporary work from within and shaped by the Pacific Island or Asian communities in New Zealand. However, one significant young artist working from a strong textile craft base is Ani O’Neill. Resisting traditional distinctions between the fine arts and craft, O’Neill employs the Pacific craft forms of *tivaevae*, lei making, weaving and crochet, interrogating notions of the local and global. Her lurid colour crocheted targets allude to Jasper Johns’ famous target series, while also referencing the Pacifika fascination with hip-hop street culture. She also has a performance role with the Pacific Sisters, a music and dance group.

Other more established artists look to the land and sea, connecting with place through direct experience. Yvonne Sloan has been working on a theme of South Pacific Sails

series since 1990, along with weaving inspired by the native bush, particularly the Nikau palm. Complex colour changes in a twill structure play on the shifting light qualities of forest or water. The installation shown here is developed from her exploration and melding of the European and Oceanic sail shapes. To quote: "Most of our ancestors have come to NZ by sail. We are surrounded by the sea, set in the South Pacific. Historically sailing and arriving in NZ is important regardless of one's origin and culture."⁸

The sense of place, expressed through multi-layered relationships and connections is also relevant in Judy McIntosh Wilson's work. Her earlier sculptural work utilised natural wool fleece in woven constructions and this same aesthetic extends to the installations made of carefully arranged materials from where she lives: river stone, bark, driftwood, sea shells. Her installations such as 'Wiakuku' or 'Tideline' refers to her rural environment and while not using textile structures, uses the pattern of repeating elements, contrasting surfaces with a sensitivity to materials. Wilson speaks of an activity begun at an early age, that of 'wandering around and picking things up', which she continues to do, renewing regularly her connection with the particularities of the Canterbury land and seascape. Exhibiting internationally, Wilson draws her strength and inspiration from the local.⁹

Lucy Lippard discusses the concept thus:

*"Inherent in the local is the concept of place- a portion of land/town/cityscape seen from the inside, the resonance of a specific location that is known and familiar. Most often place applies to our own "local"- entwined with personal memory, known or unknown histories, marks made in the land that provoke and evoke."*¹⁰

My own work over the last few years has been concerned with place in a different sense. It is very definitely of the Pacific; images of coasts, landfall, maps, codes and symbols, weaving colonial histories with personal narratives. Childhood experiences of living on a tall ship; sailing between California, Hawaii and Tahiti; coastal sailing in New Zealand waters; formative and lasting experiences. Journeying is a recurring theme, journeys of the past intermingling with the present: each leaving, strengthens the return.

The double-layered weaving technique I generally use is influenced by ikat textiles which lends a watery, blurry edge to the images, not dissimilar to the processes of memory. The specific landscape of my current home on the Otago Peninsula appears more than once – a particular consciousness, a particular place.

In one narrative, the marks of mapping, ordering and naming occur in the same space as a representation of an early encounter between an English officer and a Maori - each extending hands in a gesture of reciprocal greeting and exchange. This image by an

⁸ Exhibition catalogue *New Zealand Weaving* – Yvonne Sloan, Ian Spalding at the Crawford Arts Centre, St Andrews, Scotland 1998

⁹ Fearnley, Laurence *Earthwalk: Judy McIntosh Wilson: A Survey 1981-1998*. Exhibition catalogue. Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt 1998

¹⁰ Lippard, Lucy R op cited. p.7

unknown artist is used as an iconic motif in Anne Salmond's book *Two Worlds*¹¹ from which I borrowed influences for my work "Several Worlds" a 5 metre long journey of close and distant viewpoints. Another work titled "Charts" leaves space for the histories yet to be written: the boundaries are sketched out, some recordings are made, but with the potential as yet unfulfilled.

A series called "Constructed Surfaces" represents a new concern with the abstracted marks of geography, the dominant grid and screens through which the world is viewed and analysed. These mappings however are less obvious creating space, open spaces; new stories in cloth in which narratives can unfold. A space in which discovery continues. The metaphors between weaving and location are many. Although Lucy Lippard is not referring to weaving, the link is one I make:

*"Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person's life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth. It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there."*¹²

The mapping of nationhood continues to be drawn and redrawn; cultural and personal identities are tried and tested; fresh voices articulate the traditions of making; while artists working in textiles, continue to explore the terrain of our place; Aotearoa, a Pacific nation and location.

¹¹ Salmond, Anne, op cited

¹² Lippard, Lucy R op cited. p.7